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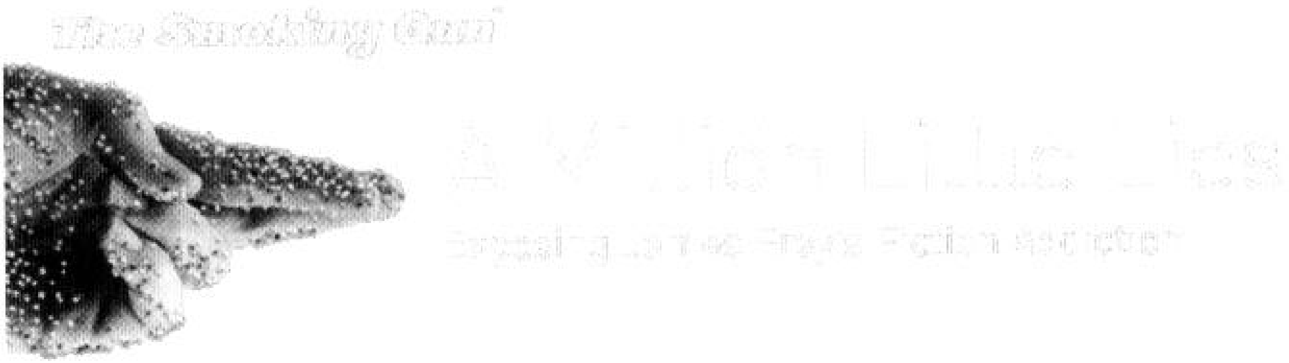

EXCLUSIVE

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The Man Who Conned Oprah

continued

Winfrey clearly recognized the book's appeal to her largely female audience. When he's not banging hookers or having a gal snort cocaine off his penis, Frey shows a deep, and often sweet, reverence for the women with whom he is involved. At turns volatile and vulnerable, chivalrous and brutish, Frey is a true reclamation project, complete with puke- and snot-stained clothing. What's a girl not to love?

Pursuing Frey documents, we were struck by the number of people TSG contacted who were either reading, or had already read, "A Million Little Pieces" as a result of the Winfrey endorsement. When we sent copies of the book to a pair of male cops, the volumes were quickly commandeered by their respective significant others. When a Michigan sheriff's aide sent us an old Frey mug shot, she enclosed a handwritten letter noting, "And by the way, I am reading his 1st book "A Million Little Pieces" & can't put it down." An Ohio police chief told us that his dispatcher had finished the book two weeks before we first called. Friends and relatives, too, were reading Frey, with one acquaintance reporting that she bought the book after seeing three other women reading it in her Metro-North railroad car.

It was after the Oprah show aired that TSG first took a look at Frey. We had simply planned to track down one of his many mug shots and add it to our site's large collection. While Frey offers no specific details about when and where he was collared, the book does mention three states where he ran into trouble: Ohio, Michigan, and North Carolina. While nine of Frey's 14 reported arrests would have occurred when he was a minor, there still remained five cases for which a booking photo (not to

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James Frey, Granville,

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In "A Million Little Piece fueled Frey runs down a Ohio town and a wild m The Granville Police Dep on the 1992 incident tel different story.

1992 Ohio Mug Sh

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Frey claimed he was the an FBI probe into drug

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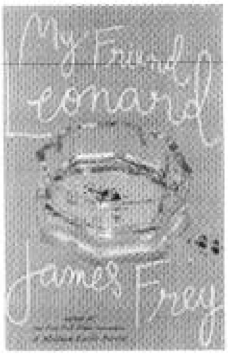
mention police and court records) should have existed. When we asked Frey if his reporting of the laundry list of juvenile crimes and arrests was accurate, he answered, "Yeah, some of 'em are, some of 'em aren't. I mean I just sorta tried to play off memory for that stuff."

However, repeated dead ends on a county-by-county records search turned our one-off hunt for a mug shot into a more prolonged review of various portions of Frey's book. In an attempt to confirm or disprove his accounts, we examined matters for which there would likely be a paper trail at courthouses, police departments, or motor vehicle agencies.



While the book is brimming with improbable characters--like the colorful mafioso Leonard and the tragic crack whore Lilly, with whom Frey takes up in Hazelden--and equally implausible scenes, we chose to focus on the crime and justice aspect of "A Million Little Pieces." Which wasn't much of a decision since almost every character in Frey's book that could address the remaining topics has either committed suicide, been murdered, died of AIDS, been sentenced to life in prison, gone missing, landed in an institution for the criminally insane, or fell off a fishing boat never to be seen again.

While we do not doubt Frey spent time in rehab, there really isn't anyone left (besides the author himself) to vouch for many of the book's outlandish stories.

• • •

According to Frey, his juvenile criminal career included the kind of mindless vandalism that many suburban kids might recognize: blowing up mailboxes, breaking a statue on a neighbor's lawn, etc. As with most things Frey, tales of his delinquency can't be verified.

Frey, you see, was a raging young man who hated living in leafy, prosperous St. Joseph, Michigan (his family moved there from a Cleveland suburb when he was 12). He was an outcast who didn't "relate to any of the Kids in the Town...At first I made an effort to fit in, but I couldn't pretend, and after a few weeks, I stopped trying. I am who I am and they could either like me or hate me. They hated me with a fucking vengeance."

Soon, Jimmy Frey was getting "taunted, pushed around and beat up." He matched every aggression with his own taunts and punches. "Within a month or two I had a reputation. Teachers talked about me, Parents talked about me, the local Cops talked about me." He declared "War" on these unnamed tormentors: "I didn't care whether I won or lost, I just wanted to fight. Bring it on, you Motherfuckers, bring everything you've got. I'm ready to go fucking fight."

The Ohio transplant was radioactive, a friendless outcast, the "worst kid" in St. Joseph. Frey told Winfrey, "I was one of those kids who parents

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reports on the tragedy.

Michigan DUI Bus

Frey writes of spending
after setting a county B
record following a 1988
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The Chicken Pox

Frey avoided any time
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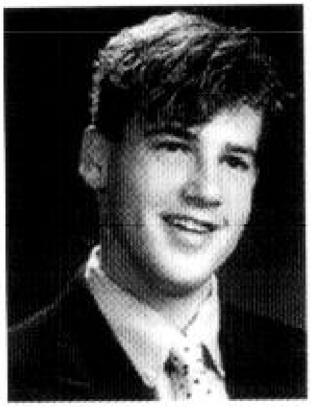
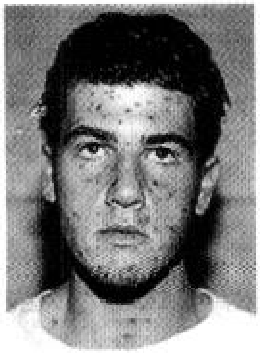

Frey's 1988 high school yearbook portrait

Somehow, that message was lost on Paul Santarlas, a high school classmate of Frey's who grew up directly across the street from him on Valley View Drive and called Frey's parents a "very generous" couple. "I don't think he was ever in any more trouble than anyone else," said Santarlas, who, like Frey, was a member of the St. Joseph High School Class of 1988. Frey, he recalled, was a "reasonably popular guy in high school" who "wasn't an outcast." [A large photo in the 1988 yearbook, the "Mazenblue," shows Frey in action on the school's soccer team.]

"I never saw anything that stood out," said Santarlas. Frey was a "normal guy" who didn't get in any more trouble than the average St. Joseph teen--perhaps a little drinking here, some weed there. What about those stern parental warnings to avoid Frey? "I never heard that," said Santarlas, who had not yet read "A Million Little Pieces" when interviewed by TSG.

A thorough review of court and police records in the city and township of St. Joseph, the larger Berrien County, and surrounding counties turned up only one case, which landed Frey in a Michigan District Court around the time of his high school graduation. Here's how he succinctly described that drunk driving bust in "A Million Little Pieces": "Got first DUI. Blew a .36, and set a County Record. Went to Jail for a week."

A report by the St. Joseph Township Police tells a different story. Just after midnight on June 8, 1988, a cop spotted the 18-year-old Frey's car weaving across the center line of Lakeshore Drive. After executing a traffic stop, the officer noticed Frey's eyes were glassy, his breath smelled of booze, and he "appeared dazed." Frey first told the cop he had drunk two beers, but later revised the estimate to four. After failing a series of field sobriety tests, Frey was arrested for drunk driving and for failure to carry his driver's license. He was transported to the Berrien County Sheriff's Office, where he agreed to undergo a Breathalyzer test.


A chicken pox-laden Frey

Though he would later write of setting a .36 county record, Frey's blood alcohol level was actually recorded in successive tests at .21 and .20 (about twice the legal limit). As for his claim to have spent a week in jail after the arrest, the report debunks that assertion. After Frey's parents were called, he was allowed to quickly bond out, since the county jail "did not want him in their facility." Because Frey had the chicken pox (which is apparent in his mug shot) and the sheriff did not want him anywhere near other arrestees. Two weeks later, court records show, he pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of reckless driving and was fined $305. No

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jail, no framed certificate for setting the Berrien County Blood Alcohol Content record.

[When we asked Frey why he didn't move to expunge the records from this DUI arrest, as he did with the subsequent Ohio case, he said, "'Cause I didn't think it was that big a deal. It's not as big a deal as it is in the book."]

But these are minor embellishments compared to how Frey has described his next police encounter.

Three months after his Michigan arrest, Frey began his studies at Denison University, a 2100-student liberal arts school in the central Ohio town of Granville. It was here, according to "A Million Little Pieces," that Frey majored in substance abuse. He blacked out and vomited daily, frequently bled from his nose due to cocaine ingestion, and even pissed in his bed for the first time. This abuse of alcohol and drugs exacerbated Frey's rage, anger, and extreme pain, a self-destructive cocktail that he named "the Fury."

His habits were underwritten by a monthly allowance from his wealthy and unwitting folks (dad was a top executive). He supplemented his income by selling dope, which brought him to the attention of the local cops and the FBI, who jointly probed his narcotics operation, Frey claims in the book. Amazingly, though he was reportedly a vomiting drunken addict bleeding from various orifices, Frey was able to graduate from Denison on time in 1992 (talk about managing your addiction!). Maybe it was support from fellow brothers at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity that helped the Michigan high school outcast persevere. Makes you wonder if Frey had shot heroin, perhaps he would have also snagged a master's.

During these drug-addled Denison days, Frey wrote, "Lying became part of my life. I lied if I needed to lie to get something or get out of something."

While Frey claims to have been arrested several times during college, TSG found evidence of only one bust--and it's the single crime for which he offers any significant details in "A Million Little Pieces." Though Frey provides no dates, the incident occurred in October 1992, about five months after his Denison graduation.

As he tells it, Frey returned to Ohio in a bid to reconcile with a college girlfriend who, it turned out, wanted nothing to do with him. "I was crushed. I went out and I drank as much as I could and smoked as much crack as I could and when I was good and loaded, I decided to go find her and try to talk to her again." He headed to look for her at a local bar. And that's when the trouble began. Here's his account from "A Million Little Pieces":

> As I was driving up, I saw her standing out front with a few of

> her friends. I was staring at her and not paying attention to the road and I drove up onto a sidewalk and hit a Cop who was standing there. I didn't hit him hard because I was only going about five miles an hour, but I hit him. The Cop called for backup and I sat in the car and stared at her and waited. The backup came and they approached the car and asked me to get out and I said you want me out, then get me out, you fucking Pigs. They opened the door, I started swinging, and they beat my ass with billy clubs and arrested me. As they hauled me away kicking and screaming, I tried to get the crowd to attack them and free me, which didn't happen.

After a night in jail, Frey was arraigned the following morning and released after a friend posted his bail with a credit card. He was, the book noted, hit with an imposing set of criminal charges: "Assault with a Deadly Weapon, Assaulting an Officer of the Law, Felony DUI, Disturbing the Peace, Resisting Arrest, Driving Without a License, Driving Without Insurance, Attempted Incitement of a Riot, Possession of a Narcotic with Intent to Distribute, and Felony Mayhem." The only count Frey took issue with was the drug charge (for possession of a "bag of crack cocaine"): "That was bullshit because I intended to use it, not distribute it."

The Ohio arrest--and its related judicial peril--is a crucial part of "A Million Little Pieces." The violent, drug-fueled arrest certifies Frey as a wild man and justifies the capital 'c' in Criminal.

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